

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method comprising:

2 displaying a service provider and a service provider rate for communicating with
3 the service provider and a real-time indication of whether the service provider is
4 available;

5 receiving a request from a first customer to communicate with the service
6 provider;

7 connecting the first customer to the service provider through a link capable of
8 transmitting from the service provider to the first customer;

9 receiving a request from a second customer to communicate with the service
10 provider; and

11 connecting the second customer to the service provider through a link capable of
12 transmitting from the service provider to the second customer while the first customer is
13 coupled to the service provider;

14 billing the first customer automatically based on the time during which the link to
15 the first customer is maintained; and

16 billing the second customer automatically based on the time during which the link
17 to the second customer is maintained.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein:

1 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
2 use of telephone connections.

1 3. The method of claim 1 wherein:

2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet.

1 4. The method of claim 1 wherein:

2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 5. The method of claim 1 wherein:

2 the first customer paying an intermediary and the second customer paying the
3 intermediary, the intermediary receiving the requests, the intermediary connecting the
4 service provider to the first customer, the intermediary connecting the service provider
5 to the second customer, the intermediary performing the billing.

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1 6. The method of claim 5 wherein:
2 the intermediary having a set of service providers including the service provider;
3 and
4 the intermediary performing the providing in response to a choice by the first
5 customer of the service provider from the set of service providers.

1 7. The method of claim 6 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet or through use of telephone connections.

1 8. The method of claim 6 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 9. The method of claim 8 further comprising:
2 moderating transmissions from the service provider and transmissions from the
3 first customer.

1 10. The method of claim 9 wherein:
2 the moderating is performed by the service provider.

1 11. The method of claim 9 wherein:
2 the moderating is performed by a moderator.

1 12. The method of claim 11 further comprising:
2 the moderator receiving a request from the first customer to transmit to the
3 service provider.

1 13. The method of claim 12 further comprising:
2 the moderator granting the request from the first customer to transmit to the
3 service provider upon payment by the first customer to the intermediary.

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1 14. The method of claim 12 wherein:
2 the request from the first customer to transmit to the service provider pertains to
3 conversing with the service provider.

1 15. The method of claim 14 further comprising:
2 permitting the first customer to converse with the service provider; and
3 receiving payment from the first customer based on a duration of the conversing.

1 16. The method of claim 14 further comprising:
2 receiving a request from the second customer to converse with the service
3 provider.

22. The method of claim 21 further comprising:
the moderator queuing requests to transmit questions to the service provider.

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23. The method of claim 12 further comprising:

removing the first customer from the link between the first customer and the

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service provider, the removing performed by the moderator.

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1 24. A system for connecting a plurality of customers to a service provider
2 comprising:

3 a first logic unit configured to display a service provider rate for listening to a
4 service provider and to provide a real-time indication of whether the service provider is
5 available;

6 a second logic unit coupled to the first logic unit, the second logic unit configured
7 to receive a request from a first customer to communicate with the service provider, the
8 second logic unit further configured to connect the first customer to the service provider
9 through a link capable of transmitting from the service provider to the first customer;

10 the second logic unit further configured to receive a request from a second
11 customer to communicate with the service provider, and the second logic unit further
12 configured to connect the second customer to the service provider through a link
13 capable of transmitting from the service provider to the second customer while the first
14 customer is connected to the service provider; and

15 a third logic unit coupled to the second logic unit, the third logic unit configured to
16 bill the first customer automatically based on the time during which the link to the first
17 customer is maintained, and the third logic unit further configured to bill the second
18 customer automatically based on the time during which the link to the second customer
19 is maintained.

1 25. The system of claim 24 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 26. The system of claim 24 wherein:
2 an intermediary including the first logic unit, the second logic unit and the third
3 logic unit, the first customer paying the intermediary and the second customer paying
4 the intermediary.

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1 27. The system of claim 26 wherein:
2 the intermediary having a set of service providers including the service provider,
3 the set of service providers accessible by the first logic unit; and
4 the first logic unit configured to receive a choice by the first customer of the
5 service provider from the set of service providers, the first logic unit configured to
6 display the service provider in response to the choice.

1 28. The system of claim 27 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet or through use of telephone connections.

1 29. The system of claim 27 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 30. The system of claim 29 further comprising:
2 a fourth logic unit coupled to the second logic unit, the fourth logic unit
3 configured to moderate transmissions from the service provider and transmissions from
4 the first customer.

1 31. The system of claim 30 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is controlled by the service provider.

1 32. The system of claim 30 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is controlled by a moderator.

1 33. The system of claim 32 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a request from the first customer to
3 transmit to the service provider.

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1 34. The system of claim 33 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a grant of the request from the first
3 customer to transmit to the service provider upon payment by the first customer to the
4 intermediary, the fourth logic unit is configured to permit transmission from the first
5 customer to the service provider upon receipt of the grant.

1 35. The system of claim 33 wherein:
2 the request from the first customer to transmit to the service provider pertains to
3 conversing with the service provider.

1 36. The system of claim 35 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to permit the first customer to converse with the
3 service provider; and
4 the intermediary is configured to receive payment from the first customer based
5 on a duration of the conversing.

1 37. The system of claim 35 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a request from the second customer
3 to converse with the service provider.

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1 38. The system of claim 37 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to maintain a queue of requests to converse
3 with the service provider, the fourth logic unit is configured to adjust the queue of
4 requests responsive to the moderator.

1 39. The system of claim 36 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is further configured to end the conversing between the first
3 customer and the service provider.

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1 40. The system of claim 33 wherein:
2 the request from the first customer to transmit to the service provider pertains to
3 transmitting a question to the service provider.

1 41. The system of claim 40 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to permit the first customer to transmit the
3 question to the service provider; and
4 the intermediary is configured to receive payment from the first customer in
5 exchange for transmitting the question to the service provider.

1 42. The system of claim 40 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a request from the second customer
3 to transmit a question to the service provider.

1 43. The system of claim 42 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to maintain a queue of requests to converse
3 with the service provider, the fourth logic unit is configured to adjust the queue of
4 requests responsive to the moderator.

1 44. The system of claim 33 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit further is configured to remove the first customer from the
3 link between the first customer and the service provider, the fourth logic unit is
4 configured to remove the first customer from the link responsive to the moderator.

1 45. The system of claim 24 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet.

1 46. The system of claim 24 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of telephone lines.

1 47. A machine-readable medium embodying instructions, the instructions for
2 execution by a processor, execution of the instructions by the processor causing the
3 processor to perform a method comprising:

4 displaying a service provider and a service provider rate for listening to the
5 service provider and a real-time indication of whether the service provider is available;

6 receiving a request from a first customer to communicate with the service
7 provider;

8 connecting the first customer to the service provider through a link capable of
9 transmitting from the service provider to the first customer;

10 receiving a request from a second customer to communicate with the service
11 provider; and

12 connecting the second customer to the service provider through a link capable of
13 transmitting from the service provider to the second customer while the first customer is
14 connected to the service provider;

15 billing the first customer automatically based on the time during which the link to
16 the first customer is maintained; and

17 billing the second customer automatically based on the time during which the link
18 to the second customer is maintained.

1 48. The machine-readable medium of claim 47 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method wherein:

3 the first customer paying an intermediary and the second customer paying the
4 intermediary, the intermediary receiving the requests, the intermediary connecting the
5 service provider to the first customer, the intermediary connecting the service provider
6 to the second customer, the intermediary performing the billing.

1 49. The machine-readable medium of claim 48 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method wherein:

3 the intermediary having a set of service providers including the service provider;

4 and

5 the intermediary performing the displaying in response to a choice by the first
6 customer of the service provider from the set of service providers.

1 50. The machine-readable medium of claim 49 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method wherein:

3 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
4 use of the internet or through use of telephone connections.

1 51. The machine-readable medium method of claim 49 wherein:

2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 52. The machine-readable medium of claim 51 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 moderating transmissions from the service provider and transmissions from the
4 first customer.

1 53. The machine-readable medium of claim 52 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method wherein:
3 the moderating is performed by the service provider.

1 54. The machine-readable medium of claim 52 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method wherein:
3 the moderating is performed by a moderator.

1 55. The machine-readable medium of claim 54 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 the moderator receiving a request from the first customer to transmit to the
4 service provider.

1 56. The machine-readable medium of claim 55 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 the moderator granting the request from the first customer to transmit to the
4 service provider upon payment by the first customer to the intermediary.

1 57. The machine-readable medium of claim 55 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 receiving a request from the second customer to transmit to the service provider.

1 58. The machine-readable medium of claim 57 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 the moderator queuing requests to transmit to the service provider.

1 59. The machine-readable medium of claim 56 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 ending the transmitting from the first customer to the service provider.

1 60. The machine-readable medium of claim 54 further embodying instructions,
2 the instructions causing the processor to perform the method further comprising:
3 removing the first customer from the link between the first customer and the
4 service provider, the removing performed by the moderator.

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1 61. A system comprising:

2 means for displaying a service provider and a service provider rate for listening
3 to the service provider and a real-time indication of whether the service provider is
4 available;

5 means for receiving a request from a first customer to communicate with the
6 service provider;

7 means for connecting the first customer to the service provider through a link
8 capable of transmitting from the service provider to the first customer;

9 means for receiving a request from a second customer to communicate with the
10 service provider; and

11 means for connecting the second customer to the service provider through a link
12 capable of transmitting from the service provider to the second customer while the first
13 customer is connected to the service provider;

14 means for billing the first customer automatically based on the time during which
15 the link to the first customer is maintained; and

16 means for billing the second customer automatically based on the time during
17 which the link to the second customer is maintained.

1 62. The system of claim 61 wherein:

2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 63. The system of claim 62 wherein:
2 the means for displaying having a set of service providers including the service
3 provider; and
4 the means for displaying performing the displaying in response to a choice by the
5 first customer of the service provider from the set of service providers.

1 64. The system of claim 63 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet or through use of telephone connections.

1 65. The system of claim 63 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 66. The system of claim 63 further comprising:
2 means for moderating transmissions from the service provider and transmissions
3 from the first customer.

1 67. The system of claim 66 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to perform responsive to the service
3 provider.

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1 68. The system of claim 66 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to perform responsive to a moderator.

1 69. The system of claim 68 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to receive a request from the first
3 customer to transmit to the service provider.

1 70. The system of claim 69 wherein:
2 the moderator granting the request from the first customer to transmit to the
3 service provider, the means for moderating permitting the first customer to transmit to
4 the service provider responsive to the moderator granting the request.

1 71. The system of claim 70 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to receive a request from the second
3 customer to transmit to the service provider.

1 72. The system of claim 71 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to queue requests to transmit to the
3 service provider.

1 73. The system of claim 70 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to end the conversing between the first
3 customer and the service provider responsive to the moderator.

1 74. The system of claim 68 wherein:
2 the means for moderating is configured to remove the first customer from the link
3 between the first customer and the service provider, the removing performed
4 responsive to the moderator.

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1 75. A system for connecting a plurality of customers to a service provider
2 comprising:

3 a communications interface; and

4 a controller computer coupled to the communications interface having:

5 a first logic unit configured to display a service provider rate for listening to a
6 service provider and to provide a real-time indication of whether the service provider is
7 available;

8 a second logic unit coupled to the first logic unit, the second logic unit configured
9 to receive a request from a first customer to communicate with the service provider, the
10 second logic unit further configured to connect the first customer to the service provider
11 through a link capable of transmitting from the service provider to the first customer;

12 the second logic unit further configured to receive a request from a second
13 customer to communicate with the service provider, and the second logic unit further
14 configured to connect the second customer to the service provider through a link
15 capable of transmitting from the service provider to the second customer while the first
16 customer is connected to the service provider; and

17 a third logic unit coupled to the second logic unit, the third logic unit configured to
18 bill the first customer automatically based on the time during which the link to the first
19 customer is maintained, and the third logic unit further configured to bill the second
20 customer automatically based on the time during which the link to the second customer
21 is maintained.

1 76. The system of claim 75 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is configured to transmit
3 from the first customer to the service provider.

1 77. The system of claim 76 wherein:
2 the system having a set of service providers including the service provider, the
3 set of service providers accessible by the first logic unit; and
4 the first logic unit is configured to receive a choice by the first customer of the
5 service provider from the set of service providers, the first logic unit is configured to
6 display the service provider in response to the choice.

1 78. The system of claim 77 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet or through use of telephone connections.

1 79. The system of claim 77 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer configured to transmit from
3 the first customer to the service provider.

1 80. The system of claim 79 wherein:
2 the controller computer further having a fourth logic unit coupled to the second
3 logic unit, the fourth logic unit configured to moderate transmissions from the service
4 provider and transmissions from the first customer.

1 81. The system of claim 80 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is controlled by the service provider.

1 82. The system of claim 80 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is controlled by a moderator.

1 83. The system of claim 82 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a request from the first customer to
3 transmit to the service provider.

1 84. The system of claim 83 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a grant of the request from the first
3 customer to transmit to the service provider upon payment by the first customer to the
4 system, the fourth logic unit is configured to permit transmission from the first customer
5 to the service provider upon receipt of the grant.

1 85. The system of claim 83 wherein:
2 the request from the first customer to transmit to the service provider pertains to
3 conversing with the service provider.

1 86. The system of claim 85 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to permit the first customer to converse with the
3 service provider; and
4 the system is configured to receive payment from the first customer based on a
5 duration of the conversing.

1 87. The system of claim 85 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a request from the second customer
3 to converse with the service provider.

1 88. The system of claim 87 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to maintain a queue of requests to converse
3 with the service provider, the fourth logic unit is configured to adjust the queue of
4 requests responsive to the moderator.

1 89. The system of claim 86 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is further configured to end the conversing between the first
3 customer and the service provider.

1 90. The system of claim 83 wherein:
2 the request from the first customer to transmit to the service provider pertains to
3 transmitting a question to the service provider.

1 91. The system of claim 90 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to permit the first customer to transmit the
3 question to the service provider; and
4 the system is configured to receive payment from the first customer in exchange
5 for transmitting the question to the service provider.

1 92. The system of claim 90 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to receive a request from the second customer
3 to transmit a question to the service provider.

1 93. The system of claim 92 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is configured to maintain a queue of requests to converse
3 with the service provider, the fourth logic unit is configured to adjust the queue of
4 requests responsive to the moderator.

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1 94. The system of claim 83 wherein:
2 the fourth logic unit is further configured to remove the first customer from the
3 link between the first customer and the service provider, the fourth logic unit is
4 configured to remove the first customer from the link responsive to the moderator.

1 95. The system of claim 75 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of the internet.

1 96. The system of claim 75 wherein:
2 the link from the service provider to the first customer is implemented through
3 use of telephone lines.

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